

INFORMAL READING

REFLECTIONS ON YA NOVELS

by Rachael McClellan, Raenell Smith & Tom Smith



Reflecting on *Angus, Thongs, and Full-Frontal Snogging* (Rennison) by Rachael McClellan

In case adults have forgotten what it's like to: kiss a boy ("snog") for the first time, menstruate for the first time ("have the painters in"), or live in the agony that is adolescence, Louise Rennison's *Angus, Thongs, and Full-Frontal Snogging* would serve as a vivid reminder. At times, this work makes the reader laugh out loud; at others, it makes the reader reminisce in agony as s/he reads about Georgia Nicholson's very real relationships with boys, her family members, and her friends.

In Georgia, Rennison has captured the many facets of the voice of a teenage girl. It is at times sarcastic and witty, "I sense something . . . what is it? Oh, yes, it's my first poor conduct mark coming along" (56); at others morose, "I have no friends. Not one single friend. . . . I may as well be dead" (15).

Rennison also does an excellent job in depicting the feelings most teenage girls have toward their parents, or "The Olds," as Georgia refers to them. Georgia seems to take perverse pleasure in being as cruel as possible in letting the family know that with them is the last place she wants to be; "We are four people who, through great misfortune, happen to be stuck in the same house. Why make it worse by going for a walk together?" (29). Most of Georgia's anger seems to be directed at her father, whom Georgia describes as having "the mentality of a Teletubby only not so developed" (13).

Equally cutting are the remarks that Georgia makes about school, "I'd forgotten how utterly crap school is," (54) and especially her teachers. *Angus* should be required reading for junior high teachers everywhere, lest we forget what we really thought of our own teachers in school or the real reason why we were there as Georgia relates in conversation with "Slim," the headmistress, "the main difficulty is that she imagines we are at school to learn stuff and we know we are at school to fill in the idle hours before we go home and hang around with our mates doing important things . . . makeup and playing records and trapping boys" (89-90).

A Memory Response: *The Beet Fields* (Paulsen) Intersecting with My Life by Tom Smith

What this book evokes for me is memories of my own 16th summer when I hitchhiked 5,000 miles around the United States with a friend. What struck me about "the boy" in *The Beet Fields* is how his innocence both protects him and makes him vulnerable. Reflecting back on my 16th summer, this was at least partly true for me. I took risks (sleeping in city parks, hitchhiking in the middle of Milwaukee, getting into cars with weirdos, etc.) that constantly put my life in danger and yet I came through it all unscathed. "The boy" moves through the landscape of the story with an intense vulnerability, but mostly he comes out okay. He can even say to himself after losing his money to the deputy and getting out of the car with the dead Hungarian in it, "His luck wasn't that bad: he'd gotten away from the law and wasn't hurt in the wreck and he was moving" (93). Even today I can remember from that summer the sense that it was oddly reassuring to be moving. As if staying in any one place too long was the dangerous thing.

In the book "the boy" is also innocent in the ways of women. He gets his first introduction with the old man who teaches him that women "all have the moon on their shoulder" (34). Later he decides to work for Bill because of his daughter, Lynnette, whom he never even speaks to. And then, of course, there's Ruby—his precious gem, who is little more than a prostitute. But his decisions turn on the women. Lacking anything else to drive him forward, his passion both sexual and poetic dictate his direction.

At the very beginning of our trip out West, my friend and I met a girl in a campground. We were both taken by her. We traveled 4,000 miles and managed on the return trip to stop back in that campground (her parents owned it) and surprise her. We spent a couple of days there. It still amazes me to think that I would go to all that trouble to see a girl that I had only met once. But this is where Paulsen is so good I suppose. These incidents could just be sexual in a pornographic sense, but instead he creates something with this "boy" that is universal. He gives us the beauty of innocence and the

power of naïveté as well as the poetry of passion. He goes beyond gonads and captures something lyrical and true.

Responding to *Born Confused* (Hidier) by Raenell M. Smith

“Five hundred pages.” I could hear my students in my head, “Five hundred pages.” For pleasure reading, this seemed like a daunting task. Not only was this novel five hundred pages, it was reading that requires some work. There are many new words. There is an unfamiliar culture. There are many things happening at the same time. This book requires effort to read; this book is a challenge.

I am glad I stuck with this. This is exactly what I thought when I made it to the conclusion of this novel. This was thick reading. It was like swimming through molasses. The further I went into the novel, the less convinced I was that I wanted to continue. There was not a lot of action. There seemed to be so much going on and some of it I did not even understand.

As I put the book down for a while, I started thinking about what it is I say to my students when they are about to give up on a book I know is good. And this book is supposed to be good, at least according to the experts. So after some mulling and coaxing, I started where I left off. I found when I let go of the frustration that the novel wasn’t doing what I thought it should do, the reading became much easier. Nearing the end, I started to laugh and cry and connect.

After finishing the book and thinking all of this over, I was concerned that the very things that made me, a more mature reader, not want to finish would be the things that would keep a teen from not finishing or not even starting this novel. Cultural barriers, seemingly one-dimensional supporting characters, and narration that is more psychologically expressive than action-oriented caused this novel to start off slowly. The narrator seemingly gives away the title in the beginning. The amount of time it seemed to take to discover things. Many characters seemed very stereotypical. All of these things made the reading difficult, even though in the end they seemed to pay off. I am not sure when encouraging a teen reader if I have the answers to convince them they should stick with the book. I am not sure I would want to encourage them to stick to a book they were not enjoying.

Then I began wondering if maybe my age was a disadvantage in this reading. I have certainly read “thick” books in my time. I have enjoyed books many thought were difficult or even awful (*The Scarlet Letter*), but again I am not sure if that is encouragement to a young adult. I keep coming back to the fact that this novel could have been just as effective if it tried the “less is more” concept. As for resolving my

issues with teen readers, I will just try it in the fall. I will put the book in my classroom collection. I will recommend it to readers for SURF (silent uninterrupted reading for fun), and I will see what kind of feedback I get.

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